




Eleanor Antin

SELECTIONS FROM THE ANGEL OF MERCY

Whitney Museum of American Art January 8 – March 9, 1997





Eleanor Antin

In Eleanor Antin's world, the individual is not composed of readily definable traits and history is not a chronology of cold, impersonal facts. Fantasy is wed to its arch-enemy—reality—in a tumultuous and ever-changing conflation. Antin's métier is autobiography, not in the standard sense of a life's documentation, but in the spirit of Marcel Duchamp. When Duchamp conjured up his alter ego, Rrose Sélavy, he was suggesting the potential to explore the fictitious self. Antin's autobiography is a continuous work-in-progress as she explores and acts upon fantasies and curiosities, taking on roles, confronting popular clichés. She sees *The Angel of Mercy* as a drama in two acts: the first, *The Nightingale Family Album*, a dramatization of Florence Nightingale's genteel, comfortable upper-class life before she found her true calling; and the second, *My Tour of Duty in the Crimea*, modified reenactments of this nurse-heroine's role in wartime medicine.

As a pioneering performance artist in the 1970s in Southern California, Antin allowed four distinct personas to emerge: the King, the Nurse, the Ballerina, and the Black Movie Star. As a seventeenth-century king, for instance, Antin appeared from time to time—complete with full beard and proper attire—in Solana Beach, California, shopping at the supermarket, going to the bank, and frequently talking politics with the locals. But, as with her other personas, the king was not merely a piece of character acting. The depth of her involvement became evident through performances of the king's modern-day experiences as well as through *The King's Meditations*, a diary carefully scripted in archaic English and accompanied by Rococo drawings and watercolors.

In *The Angel of Mercy*, Eleanor Antin did not want to become Florence Nightingale the way a child yearns to be a princess, a fireman, or an astronaut. Nightingale, or for



that matter Antin's other personas, are not characters that she has searched for and studied the way an actor studies a part. They are rather evocations of desires and fantasies already present within her, which she merely had to coax and nurture. Considering the nurse as a heroic being, a historical construct, and a present-day profession, Antin soon began to pose questions: Is the nurse a resourceful, independent, and powerful woman or a demure, subservient being? Who becomes a nurse and what does it mean to spend one's life in the service of others? Antin concluded that "merely to imagine this would be trivial. To understand a human situation, which plays itself out in a world, one must let the people play out their lives in that world and join them there."¹

The photographs from *The Angel of Mercy* are but one part of a larger, multilayered life construction of the Florence Nightingale/Eleanor Antin character. In 1977, with the help of friends and members of the San Diego art scene, Antin first staged these seemingly "real" documentary-style photographs. She then created an installation consisting of almost life-size painted cutouts of soldiers, doctors, and others in Nightingale's life during the Crimean War. Around these "stand-ins," along the walls of the room, hung the photographs, lending an air of veracity to the scene. To this she added several real-life characters, friends acting out key roles. In a partially scripted, partially improvised performance based both on historical fact and imagined events, she brought this complex persona to life.

Even outside of the context of the installation and performance, the photographs reveal much about Antin's process and her choice of media. There is something inherently intriguing about our perception of photography as factual document and the

knowledge we have of its susceptibility to manipulation. In Antin's work, photographs are, in fact, a recording of reality, even if it is her very personal reality. In mood, lighting, and setting, these photographs evoke the drama and even the sentimental kitsch of romance novels, action movies, and daytime soaps. The prints, tinted with coffee grounds, are faded, their tone irregular. Created in series but not necessarily in a prescribed order, the works as installed mark the narrative or cinematic qualities of Antin's work. The sepia-tone, scripted titles complete the illusion.

The great conflation of self with history, of accuracy with invention, is not, for Antin, an artwork to be completed and placed on a shelf. It is an evolving exploration in which the act of character borrowing and embellishment informs her very being. "I have found it useful to imagine my soul as presided over by four dignities—a Ballerina, a King, a Nurse and a Black Movie Star. By dividing myself among these four great personas I have learned a lot about my life and character and my situation in the world."²

—Beth Venn, Associate Curator, Permanent Collection

1. Eleanor Antin, as cited in Christopher Knight, *THE ANGEL OF MERCY*, exh. cat. (San Diego:

La Jolla Museum of Contemporary Art, 1977), n.p.; 2. *Ibid.*



outside, left to right: LORD RAGLAN VISITS US AT SCUTARI, from the series MY TOUR OF DUTY IN THE CRIMEA, 1977;
 THE NEW ARRIVAL, from the series THE NIGHTINGALE FAMILY ALBUM, 1977; "NOT TOO HIGH, SIR ", from the
 series THE NIGHTINGALE FAMILY ALBUM, 1977; inside, left to right: IN THE TRENCHES BEFORE SEBASTOPOL, from the
 series MY TOUR OF DUTY IN THE CRIMEA, 1977; THE GENTLE MUSE, from the series THE NIGHTINGALE FAMILY ALBUM, 1977



Works in the Exhibition*

All works are by Eleanor Antin (b. 1935) and in the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

They have been accessioned by the Whitney Museum as Purchase, with funds from Joanne Leonhardt Cassullo and the Photography Committee. The accession number appears at the end of each entry.

*as of December 18, 1996

THIS PUBLICATION IS
MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH
THE GENEROSITY OF
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FROM THE SERIES **THE NIGHTINGALE FAMILY ALBUM**, 1977.

All works in this series are tinted gelatin silver prints mounted on paper-board. 18 X 13 in. (45.7 X 33 cm).

THE NEW ARRIVAL 95.67.4

WHAT'S ON THE END OF THE LINE? 95.67.5

STOPPING ON THE BRIDGE TO CATCH A FISH 95.67.6

WHAT HAS SHE LOST? 95.67.7

BLIND MAN'S BUFF 95.67.8

UNINVITED GUESTS 95.67.10

THE GENTLE MUSE 95.67.11

SECRETS 95.67.12

THE LONG ADIEU 95.67.13

REVERIE 95.67.14

COUNTRY AIRS 95.67.15

"THEY ALSO SERVE..." 95.67.16

"NOT TOO HIGH, SIR—" 95.67.17

CHANCE ENCOUNTER 95.67.19

TREE SPRITE 95.67.20

THE SICK CHILD 95.67.22

MYSELF—1854 95.67.24

FROM THE SERIES **MY TOUR OF DUTY IN THE CRIMEA**, 1977.

All works in this series are tinted gelatin silver prints mounted on paper, 30 3/8 X 22 in. (77.2 X 55.9 cm).

THE ANGEL OF MERCY 95.68.1

CAMP LIFE 95.68.8

THE END 95.68.10

WAR GAMES 95.68.11

A SOLDIER'S WORK IS NEVER DONE! 95.68.13

THE PRAYER MEETING 95.68.18

LORD RAGLAN VISITS US AT SCUTARI 95.68.22

CAMP PARTY 95.68.28

OPERATION IN THE FIELD HOSPITAL 95.68.31

IN THE TRENCHES BEFORE SEBASTOPOL 95.68.32

THE EXECUTION OF A DESERTER 95.68.36

TAPS 95.68.38